

Mr Stupid

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- [0 : 00] Father in heaven, we thank you so much that you are a speaking God, and we pray that this morning you'll open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word.
- In Jesus' name we pray, amen. Well, we often overestimate ourselves. What percentage of people think their driving skills are better than average?
- Any thoughts on that? Any guesses? 85%. That's right, Simon. Spot the maths teacher with statistics up his sleeve, 85%.
- Yeah, that's right. What percentage of IT employees think that they are in the top 5% in their company?
- 32%, interestingly. What percentage of university professors think they are above average compared with their peers?
- [1 : 06] 94%. Isn't that amazing? Some of you are out there. We often think we're better than average. And that creeps into how we rate ourselves as Christians as well.
- If we were to ask ourselves, how am I really doing as a disciple of Jesus? Lots of us would think, well, I've got my faults, but I think I'm better than average. And Jephthah would have thought that about himself.
- He was the God-appointed judge of Israel. The spirit of the Lord rested on him. The spirit of the Lord rested on him. That's very clear. And the people of his tribe, the Gileadites, have asked Jephthah to save them and then rule over them and be their chief.
- He could easily have thought of himself as doing pretty well. But by the end of the story, Jephthah has catastrophically fallen.
- He does something utterly wicked. He loses his daughter. He loses his family line. And he even manages to make it sound vaguely pious as he does it. And we see professing Christians behaving very badly today, don't we?
- [2 : 11] We see it around the world. We see high-profile cases. But we also see it closer to home. And lots of you will be able to think of people who won't be in church this morning, whether here or somewhere else, because they've given up on church because of their experience of Christians behaving shockingly badly.
- Now, when that happens, how do we react when we see a minister leave his wife or a young woman or a young man? Or we see a church elder or a vestry member get arrested for theft at work?
- How do we react when we see these awful things happen? Well, what we often say in those situations is, they can't have been a Christian. They can't have been.
- And there are good reasons why we might say that. In the New Testament, sometimes when wrong behavior, bad behavior is described, it calls into question whether someone's really a believer.
- In 1 John, that's clearly the case. If someone's not living a transformed life, it's a concerning thing. In the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus preaches, if somebody is unrepentantly in a pattern of life that doesn't conform to Jesus' will, it's a dangerous sign that maybe they don't really believe in their heart.

- [3 : 28] But the problem is that sometimes when we say, that person clearly can't have been a Christian, the reason we say it is because we think, I would never do what they've done. I am better than them. So when we look at Jephthah, we're in for a bit of a shock. Because in Hebrews 11, in the New Testament, it lists heroes of the faith. People who kept going, trusting the Lord. And Jephthah is there. In verse 34 of Hebrews 11. Commended for his faith. In other words, we will see Jephthah in glory. He's a Christian. And yet his behavior is shockingly flawed. So when we see a sermon about a guy who kills his own daughter, and it's called Mr. Stupid, us above average Christians tend to sit back and think, well, this one isn't for me today. I'm glad it's being preached for some of the other people around here. But it's not for me. And the truth is, we have to recognize we're all in danger. And one of our biggest dangers is that we are naive about our own capacity to sin.
- [4 : 38] So this morning, we've got seven steps to being a really stupid Christian. Okay? The first one is, imagine your anointing exempts you. We get that in verse 29. We just have a look. Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh and passed through Mizpah of Gilead. And from there, he advanced against the Ammonites. So today, the Spirit is in every believer. But in the Old Testament, the Spirit rests on particular individuals and anoints them for particular tasks. So there's no doubt that the Lord has chosen Jephthah and anointed him and he's gifted him. And it goes to his head. Jephthah forgets that personal godliness still matters. God can write straight with crooked pencils. He uses flawed leaders for his great purposes. But that doesn't mean that the flaws don't matter.
- [5 : 36] And yet we're tempted to think like that today. Especially if you're involved in an area of service that is very obvious and recognized with gifts that people can see. If you're a gifted preacher or Bible study leader or musician. All the time the temptation is to think, God's working through me. I must be special. And we forget that what God is doing in you is much more important than what God is doing through you. It's the same when we're gifted by God in our secular life. If you're a lawyer and you make partner or you're a doctor and you make consultant. The temptation is, even as a Christian, that you get proud and you start demanding from others instead of serving others. We forget that what's essential for every Christian in every area of life is that we're bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our character. That's what God is concerned about.
- [6 : 39] Wherever he puts us and however high he promotes us. I wonder if a good test of this, about whether we're starting to think our anointing exempts us, is whether if someone asked us, a good friend, what sins are you really battling with at the moment? Would you know quite clearly? Would you have an obvious answer to that question? Are you in the battle against sin? Or have you become complacent because you know you've got the Spirit and God's your Father and you're forgiven? Let's move on. Our second step. Make your ambition central. That's most probably what leads to the vow. If you look with me at verse 30. Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's.

And I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. This is complete madness. Jephthah might have thought that an animal would come out of his house to greet him.

[7 : 48] It's at least predictable that there was a good chance it would be a person. But what is Jephthah doing making this vow anyway? We already know that God is going to deliver the Israelites out of the hands of the Ammonites.

Back in chapter 10 verse 9, they're in great distress. They pray. And by verse 16 we read, God could bear their misery no longer. He's going to save them. Jephthah doesn't need to make this vow.

So why does he make the vow? Now, it's because of his own selfish ambition. Back in chapter 11 verse 3, we heard about him having to flee his homeland and settle in the land of Tob, where there was a gang of scoundrels that came around him.

So he was driven out from his family as an illegitimate child. The elders of the tribe have now gone to beg, asking him to deliver them. And he wouldn't go until he had the cast iron guarantee.

If I do deliver you out of the Ammonites' hands, will you really let me rule over you? That's what he really wants. Acceptance by his tribe and exaltation by them matters more to him than anything else.

[8 : 59] So he wants the victory for himself. Verse 30, he says to the Lord, if you give the Ammonites into my hands, and in verse 36 his daughter says, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.

Jephthah has put his personal ambition ahead of everything else. And that's a very subtle problem, isn't it? Because what he wants is something really good.

In fact, he wants what's exactly in line with God's good purposes, that God's people will be delivered from their enemies. But Jephthah wants the good thing for the wrong reasons.

And that's a very dangerous problem today. It's dangerous in ministry. Ministry with a small m, the ministry that we're all involved with together as a church. We passionately would like our church to grow, and that's right in line with God's good purposes.

But some of us, and perhaps especially me, as the minister, the capital M minister, might want that for selfish reasons, so that people would think well of us, and think, what a good job they do at St Silas.

[10 : 13] And of course the same is true in other jobs. If you're a teacher, and you're trying to get promotion to be the head teacher or senior management, if you're a university professor, and you want to become head of department, more senior, so that you can have more influence, it might be for good reason, so that you can make good use of the gifts God has given you.

But we need wisdom to ask, why do I really want this? Is it for the glory of God, or is it for the glory of me? Jeff, there's a pretty extreme example, isn't he?

How on earth could you sacrifice your child for the sake of your ambition? But I just wonder, whether in the cosmopolitan, career-focused city of Glasgow, don't we see lots of parents, so ambitious for success at work, and the prestige it would give them, that they neglect their duties as parents?

They outsource their duties as parents, to other people. Don't we see that? And in our times, we also need to be aware of the opposite danger.

Similarly, it's from ambition, but that we put our child before everything else. So we see Christian parents who will stop practicing hospitality to lonely people.

[11 : 41] They'll stop being at church and growth group every week. They'll stop honoring their commitments to others because their whole world revolves around their child and their ambitions for that child. So that's our second step.

Make your ambition central. Let's move on to step three. Blame everybody else. The account of the victory in battle is deliberately brief, verses 32 and 33.

The Ammonites had utterly terrorized Israel mercilessly for a generation. The Lord gives the Ammonites into Jephthah's hands. He devastates 20 towns.

A victory like that calls for a great party, for music and dancing. But the tragedy unfolds in verse 34. Let's relive that.

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines. She was an only child. Then to emphasize it, except for her, he had neither son nor daughter.

[12 : 43] And then just look at his outrageous reaction. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, Oh no, my daughter, you have brought me down and I am devastated.

I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break. It's extraordinary, isn't it? I heard recently about a man called Frank Lloyd Wright.

At the age of 89, he was giving evidence in a courtroom and in the witness box, he described himself as the greatest architect in the world. Afterwards, his wife asked if he couldn't have been a little bit more modest and he said, Darling, you forget that I was under oath.

Now, we might not go that far about ourselves but we tend to have a high opinion of ourselves, don't we? So that when we find ourselves in situations where our behavior was ungodly, we look for reasons why beyond ourselves.

We blame the situation we were in or the people who caused us to behave like that. So we lose our self-control and explode with anger at our children and then we blame them.

[13 : 50] Or we get, we're grumpy at work and we're selfish and we're not trying to care for our colleagues but we blame our boss. Or we blame the latest cuts that mean that we just feel it's impossible now to do our job and be a good witness to Jesus at work.

Or we're a lazy teacher or we're a grumpy teacher but we blame the senior staff who don't support us. Or we blame the kids who are a nightmare. God puts us into circumstances where we're often under immense pressure to be godly and not to sin.

But when we're in that pressure, in the heat, we will respond either in a godly way or an ungodly way and the reason for our response is in us.

It's in our heart. We can't blame the pressure we're under for our response. And yet so often that's what we do. Just like Jephthah looking to blame everyone else for his stupidity.

Then comes step four. Keep your foolish word. As soon as Jephthah sees his daughter coming out of the house, what should he have done? He should have repented there and then and said to God, Lord, I am so sorry.

[15 : 07] I have been a complete idiot. Draw a line under it. Be humble. Receive forgiveness. Move on with your daughter. But he won't. He listens to his daughter who says, you've given your word to the Lord.

You've got to do as you've promised. She asks for two months to roam the hills with her friends. And verse 39, after the two months she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed and she was a virgin.

And there's a great irony that follows because throughout the story Jephthah's aim has been to build a great name for himself. It's been his fame and his honor and his power. But verse 39, we read, from this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate not Jephthah the savior but the daughter of Jephthah, the Gileadite.

What gets remembered by the people isn't the hero, it's the tragedy. And we need to learn to be very careful what we promise. Psalm 141 verse 3, it says this, the writer speaking to God, set a guard over my mouth, Lord, keep watch over the door of my lips.

And so often we're too quick to speak, aren't we? To make rash comments and sometimes to make stupid commitments. And we might find that there comes a point in life where we've made a commitment to somebody that was foolish and we can't go through with it without sinning against God.

[16 : 44] And as with Jephthah, there would come a point when we have to say, sorry, I've got to go back on my word rather than act immorally. I was wrong to make the commitment. Maybe if we've committed to work in a particular workplace or for a particular boss for a period of time and they're holding us to that, but we're realizing that we can't perform our duties at work without being ungodly.

And we need to say, sometimes it is better to go back on your word than to follow a path of disobedience. But how could Jephthah go through with this?

Seeing his daughter mourning with her friends, then lighting the fire and offering her as a sacrifice. Well, that's the fifth step to being a really stupid Christian.

Get your morality from your culture instead of from the Bible. Jephthah doesn't get a fresh word from the Lord here. It's not like when Abraham is on the mountaintop with Isaac and at the last minute the Lord stays his hand and provides a different sacrifice and animal.

There's nothing like that here. But that's because God doesn't need to give Jephthah a fresh word. The Holy Spirit speaks to Jephthah then.

[18 : 00] He speaks to us today. Deuteronomy 12 verse 31 He says that child sacrifice is a detestable thing to the Lord. It's very clear in the Bible.

God has told that to Jephthah in his word. This is absolutely not what God wants him to do. So why does Jephthah find it easy to do? It's because he lives in a culture where violence is much more common.

A bloodthirsty culture of tribal battles and barbarians roaming in and attacking where there are pagan sacrifices of children there are civil wars and your culture affects you very deeply.

so it seems less wrong to him to kill a child and we can see that because we don't have his blind spot. We're in a different culture.

We can tell how awful that is but we're in a culture with our own blind spots and sometimes you need a Christian from a different culture to come in and spend time with you to expose your massive cultural blind spots to point out the things that they find shocking as a fellow Christian where they feel that we're getting our morality from our culture and not from the Bible.

[19 : 19] I just wonder maybe that's something you'd be willing to do over the next couple of months spend time with one of our Christians at St. Silas who's not from Scotland from Africa from South Asia and ask them what they think our blind spots are and welcome the challenge.

What do you think they would say? I think they might say that they are astonished at how much money Christians in Glasgow spend on ourselves. There's another problem for Jephthah it's that his view of God is deeply flawed that's our sixth step live by works not by grace.

Why doesn't Jephthah just confess his sinful foolishness and save his innocent daughter? It's because he is trapped by his mistrust of God. He thought God wouldn't deliver the Ammonites into Israel's hands without a bargain so he makes a vow if you give me this God I'll give you that will that be good enough?

But we already knew that God would save Israel not because of anything Jephthah can offer to him but because of God's grace. In chapter 10 verse 16 he could bear Israel's misery no longer.

That's the picture that we have throughout the Bible of God. He is gracious he's compassionate a God you can come to any time and say Father I've made a terrible mess I'll try and do what's right by you please will you sort this mess out for me?

[20 : 51] Jephthah doesn't believe in a God like that so that when he hears his daughter say my father you've given your word to the Lord he doesn't feel there's any way out he's trapped by his vow.

Now today of course we're evangelical Christians in St Silas of course well not everybody but we're an evangelical church of course we believe God saves you by his grace not by anything that you can offer him but then we do find ourselves don't we living as though our obedience is needed to prize blessing out of God's hands.

So maybe we need to ask ourselves do you struggle to trust that God has your best interest in mind if only you'll just obey him? Do any of us sometimes think God won't be committed to love me and bless me and work what's best for me because of my sin unless I give more up for him unless I serve him more?

And it's worth asking ourselves how would I live more restfully and more peacefully in myself if I really believed that God was completely committed to my good because of Jesus?

Would that make me more restful? That's our sixth step. So step seven to being a really stupid Christian is this live as though you have no king.

[22 : 17] Jeff there is a significant downward step in the story of Judges from now on things get worse and worse we're going to see that over the summer and the overarching reason why comes a couple of times in the book in chapter 17 verse 6 and 21-25 it says this in those days Israel had no king everyone did as they saw fit.

This terrible episode is because Israel doesn't have a moral compass anymore without God and God's king to tell them what's right and wrong everyone just does what's right in their own eyes and story after story in Judges tells us this is what your society looks like or even what the church looks like when you choose to reject God's king.

Ironically Richard Dawkins the militant atheist used this story among others in the God delusion as a critique of the Bible's morality he talks about Jephthah in that book and he says this is where belief in God takes you but actually if you understand the Bible the complete opposite is true what happened in history to Israel when it didn't have a king is recorded for us to show us this is where false belief about God takes you including atheism this is where it takes you as a society when there is no moral compass everyone does as they see fit with disastrous effect now of course things don't seem that bad just now in Scotland but that's because of God's mercy and it's because we're borrowing from morality in the Christian world view from when Scotland has been so shaped for centuries by a consensus that the God of the Bible is there we're still living off borrowed capital from that when we make our moral decisions but without that we should expect our moral consensus to fragment and our morality to spiral downwards but thankfully

Judges isn't the end of the Bible story it says in those days the people had no king and seeing the mess with Jephthah is partly there to encourage us to rejoice because we do have a king and Jephthah's flaws-emphasize our risen king's perfection he was the spirit anointed one the ultimate Christ but he didn't think that his anointing exempted him he pursued righteousness he went into the wilderness and he resisted the devil he didn't make his own ambition central we read in Philippians 2 he didn't count equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing and became the servant of all he didn't blame everybody else he took the blame for what everybody else had done wrong so in Judges they had a leader who for the sake of his own glory was willing to kill his innocent daughter but in Jesus we have a leader who for our good was willing to die himself

Jephthah trapped by his own folly struck down his innocent daughter for his own selfish ambition but our God to rescue us from our folly would strike down his innocent son his only son out of love for us so that we could have eternal life let's pray together Lord Jesus we praise you for in you we have the king we need we thank you for your godliness for your servant heartedness that you came not to blame others but to take our blame not to sacrifice others but to give yourself not to be made dictator but to be made servant of all help us to reflect on the folly of Jephthah a man of faith who was deeply flawed and give us wisdom we pray so that we won't fall as your people and that this week this summer and in the years to come you will enable us to live lives that attract others to the saving gospel message that they might be saved for your glory

[26 : 43] Amen